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Johnson Had No Alternative in Taking Authority

Regrettable as may have been the effect on Mrs. Kennedy's feelings, President Johnson had no alternative to assuming the presidency instantly after John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Johnson had no way to know, and did not know, what the immediate cause of the assassination was or what its effect would be. He had on the contrary, and based on historical precedent, every reason to believe that the assassination might not be an isolated event but part of a larger plan possibly involving the assassination of himself and other officials of the government.

But in the nuclear age there is an even more compelling

reason for permitting no break in the exercise of executive authority. Johnson suddenly had become the only man alive with sole authority to order and put into effect the use of U.S. nuclear weapons.

It was not innate boorishness, or eagerness to seize authority that caused Johnson to assume his responsibility. He is a natural man, but he is neither boorish nor inconsiderate by nature. Reporters aboard Air Force One en route from Dallas to Washington observed no lack of sensitivity on Johnson's part.

One can say now that since there was no conspiracy, since there was no need to exercise the ultimate authority, that he

could have behaved differently and not boarded the airplane that was the communications center and seat of ultimate authority as it existed in Texas that day. He could have left the widow alone with her dead, and the nation would have been no worse for it. That is what he could not have known. He could take no risk whatsoever.

These are the lonely and cruel conditions that apply to the President of the United States as they do not to ordinary men. Their cruelty unfortunately must also extend to those who are dear to them.

The nation overwhelmingly approved the reassuring way

Johnson succeeded to the presidency; nor was there any visible lack of consideration for the widow and her family.

Only a year before events lifted Johnson to the presidency the nation was confronted by the real and present danger of nuclear war with the Soviet Union in the Cuban crisis. At the time Kennedy was assassinated there were rising economic problems and severe political problems that Johnson's sure ways in the presidency relieved.

But now the damage has been done to his right to one of the rare satisfactions of the presidency, the knowledge that at a critical point in time he had done well what he had

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to do, and what the country had to depend upon him to do.

The damage has been done by the publication of the substance of parts of the Manchester book authorized by the Kennedy family. It hardly makes any difference to history whether or not the book and the magazine serialization are now published.

But it would have made a difference in history if a weak, uncertain or cowed man had succeeded to the presidency, or if the events of that night in Dallas had been even more sinister and he had failed to act promptly and surely.

The Kennedy legend has hung heavily over Johnson. If its weight seems to him at times to be onerous he can scarcely be blamed. John F. Kennedy wanted him for vice president, but it is not of record that any of the other

Kennedys wished him to hold that office.

Perhaps it might be wise for universities and foundations now to think a little bit more about their projects in oral history which involve the taping of what participants in and observers of events think they remember about them. If one first-hand experience is any guide, it must occur to others who have indulged in such stream-of-consciousness comment that much of what they fed into the tape under questioning had little foundation or was twisted. Yet future writers will try to build history out of these uncertain materials.

Oral history projects in many universities and foundations are filled with this impressionistic material. History will make a mistake if it judges Johnson by the tragic emotions felt by those who loved John F. Kennedy and confided them to a tape recorder.